

The cover-up of a racist murder in Britain - What the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry has revealed and what it has not

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After 56 days the Public Inquiry into the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence concluded its first stage on July 20. The inquiry heard oral evidence from two key eyewitnesses, senior police officers involved in the murder investigation and the five white youth originally charged with the murder of the black teenager. The second part of the inquiry will be confined largely to written submissions regarding how the police should respond to racial attacks in the future. Towards the end of the year the inquiry's chairman, Sir William Macpherson, is due to submit a report advancing a series of recommendations.

Launching the inquiry last July, Labour's Home Secretary, Jack Straw, promised it would, 'allow the concerns of the Lawrence family and others to be fully addressed and will identify the lessons to be learned from this tragic case which will be relevant to the future handling of racially-motivated crimes.' The inquiry has failed on all counts. Five years after the death of the 18-year-old student in April 1993, his killers--Neil and Jamie Acourt, Luke Knight, Gary Dobson and David Norris--still enjoy immunity from prosecution.

The police and the judicial system are responsible for this. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) originally dropped charges against the five men on the pretext of insufficient evidence. Committal proceedings were later brought against three of the suspects, only due to a private prosecution instigated by Stephen's parents, Neville and Doreen. The High Court judge thwarted this on the grounds that the evidence of a key eyewitness was 'unreliable'. This decision prevented incriminating forensic and circumstantial evidence being placed before a jury. A Coroners Court ruling in 1997 found that Stephen's death was an unlawful killing caused by 'a completely unprovoked racist attack by five white youths.' Although this court lacks the powers of criminal prosecution, its verdict further compromised the police and judicial system.

Stephen's murder occurred against the background of a growing consensus between the main political parties over tightening immigration and asylum restrictions. This was accompanied by an anti-immigration campaign in the media, helping to create the political environment for a rise in racist assaults. These attacks either went unpunished or were dealt with leniently. In contrast, anti-racist protesters were dealt with severely. Nine of those who participated in a demonstration in 1993 calling for the closure of the fascist British National Party headquarters were sentenced to a combined total of 20 years in prison.

The decision by the incoming Labour government to organise a Public Inquiry into the police handling of the Lawrence case is an acknowledgement of how discredited the police force and the legal

system have become. The term 'Public Inquiry' has proven to be something of a misnomer, however. The complaints against the police by the Lawrence family have been investigated by the Police Complaints Authority (PCA), an internal police body. Proceedings at the inquiry have been interrupted by legal disputes over disclosure. Documents of the PCA had material removed before being made available. While the inquiry heard some evidence hitherto kept secret, those in authority will not be held to account for their actions. Immunity was given against any criminal or disciplinary charges that might arise.

Despite these constraints a damning picture emerged. The claim that the police investigation lacked hard evidence and received no co-operation from the general public has been disproved. Instead of a 'wall of silence' between April and May of 1993, in fact, some 26 different people provided information pointing to the killers. This included a police informer who supplied material about those involved in the attack the very next day, and two anonymous tip-offs naming four of the assailants. The police also had a statement from a white male who had been the victim of a stabbing by two of the suspects a month earlier.

The police failed to give any credible explanation of why it took them two weeks to act on the corroborated evidence of two critical witnesses. Witness B saw the assault from a passing bus. He relayed the information to witness K, who later went to the home of three of the suspects, a short distance from the murder scene. There, witness K observed the suspects acting nervously. All of them showed signs that they had recently washed themselves.

The fortnight's delay before the five were arrested meant vital forensic evidence could have been destroyed. The police even failed to intercept garbage bags being removed from the home of one suspect, even though a surveillance team witnessed this. They also failed to follow up the evidence of a young black man who, three days after Stephen's murder, was allegedly threatened with a knife by one of the suspects, who warned, 'You're next.'

After the CPS decision to drop the charges against the five suspects in July 1993, an internal review was commissioned. It concluded that the initial police investigation had 'progressed satisfactorily and all lines of inquiry [were] correctly pursued.' After years of citing this report, the police have been forced to concede that it lacks any credibility. Its author, Detective Chief Superintendent Roderick Barker, was dismissed as a witness by the chairman of the inquiry for being 'not credible'. His report was described as 'indefensible'.

The police excused their failure to carry out routine investigative

procedures on the grounds of a lack of resources or inadequate training. A procession of police officers presented themselves as bungling incompetents to avoid the charge of institutionalised racism. This reached absurd levels. Detective Superintendent Brian Weeden, who headed the initial investigation, retired in 1994 after 30 years service. He claimed ignorance of the fact that the five white youth could have been arrested on 'reasonable suspicion', an elementary point of criminal law.

From its inception the inquiry ruled the issue of racism off-limits. The PCA investigation, whilst conceding that there had been 'serious weaknesses, omissions and lost opportunities', exonerated the police of this charge. The chairman of the inquiry prevented police witnesses facing serious cross-examination along these lines. The head of the Metropolitan Police, Paul Condon, even publicly attacked the Lawrence family for harming race relations by pursuing the question of police racism.

Police corruption is another issue the inquiry has managed to keep from public scrutiny. Clifford Norris, the father of one of those originally charged with Stephen's murder, is a convicted criminal now serving a nine-and-a-half-year prison sentence for drugs and firearms offences. When his son David was on trial in July 1993 for the attempted murder of Stacy Benefield, Clifford Norris attempted to bribe the victim in return for not giving evidence. This failed, but the jury reached a verdict of not guilty. It later emerged that the jury foreman was related to a key figure in the London drugs underworld, who was on police bail at the time for handling a stolen cheque for £23,000.

Clifford Norris has a proven connection with at least one police officer involved in the Lawrence case. The officer, David Coles, conducted secret meetings in bars with Clifford Norris where he was seen with a pocket calculator and parcels were exchanged. Coles claimed he was procuring the drug smuggler as an informant, but this had not been cleared with his superiors and he was demoted. Yet Coles was appointed as the police escort for Stephen's friend, Duwayne Brooks, a key witness to the murder.

Clifford Norris was never called to give testimony to the inquiry, along with many others including witnesses B and K. The subpoena forcing the five suspects to testify on June 29 and 30 was heralded as the high point of the inquiry's first phase. It turned out to be its nadir. Before the five were due to give evidence, a High Court judge ruled that no question could be asked directly relating to their guilt in Stephen's murder. Their subsequent appearance before a body lacking the powers of a criminal court could not, under any circumstances, compensate for their never facing trial for murder.

Questioning of the five therefore centred on their possession and use of lethal weapons and their outspoken racist beliefs. They openly displayed their contempt for the fate of Stephen Lawrence. Luke Knight used the refrain, 'Not that I can remember' a total of 38 times. The answers they did give were generally provocative. A total of six knives were recovered from the home of Jamie and Neil Acourt, including a Gurkha knife with a long curved blade and a locksmith's knife. Questioned about a sword and scabbard found under the sofa at his home, Jamie Acourt said they were 'ornaments'. When asked whether this was the customary place to keep ornaments he replied, 'Yes'.

The two brothers were notorious at their former high school for threatening black and Asian pupils with coshes, knives and baseball bats. Footage from the surveillance camera planted in their flat in 1994, after Stephen's murder, records repeated conversations between

the five boasting of racial assaults. It shows Neil Acourt demonstrating to the others how to inflict an over-arm blow with a carving knife similar to the fatal blow that killed Stephen. One clip showed a conversation between Acourt and Luke Knight in which the former said that every black person should be chopped up and left with nothing but a stump. When confronted with this evidence Acourt explained that this was his idea of humour.

Gary Dobson and David Norris are also shown on the video footage bragging about their racist exploits. A knife with a 10-inch blade, similar to the one used to kill Stephen, was found under the bed of Dobson's girlfriend. When questioned about this, Dobson said it was used for gardening purposes. Outside the inquiry building, the five, protected by police, shouted insults and spat at protesters.

Yet the media reserved most of their wrath for the anti-racist protesters. Public access to the inquiry was restricted over the two days the suspects were questioned. The attempt by members of the black separatist Nation of Islam to march into the proceedings on June 29 was met by police wielding truncheons and firing CS spray. Sections of the media seized on this incident to malign other protesters outside as a racist mob. The *Evening Standard's* lead was typical, with its headline: 'Police tear gas Lawrence mob--Inquiry halted as black extremists storm the chamber shouting racist abuse'. This provided the pretext for an even larger deployment of police officers the following day, with dogs, riot shields and truncheons.

In the final days of public testimony there was an attempt to blame the Lawrence family's private prosecution for obstructing the police and the CPS in their attempts to secure the conviction of those responsible for Stephen's death.

The inquiry has singularly failed to restore public credibility in the police. An ICM poll of 1,000 people in London showed that 91 percent knew of the case. As many as 48 percent said they had lost confidence in the police due to their handling of it. One in seven expressed no trust in the police at all, with the figure doubling among black people surveyed. While the inquiry has yet to deliver its recommendations, nothing progressive will emerge from such a legal travesty.

See Also:

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